

STORY OF ALVA MORONI MURDOCK
By Ida Murdock Kirkham

(Copies from the Duchesne Record)

A. M. or Al Murdock, as he is most commonly known throughout the Uintah Basin, is the grandfather of some thirty-six persons and the great grandfather of twenty more, but in a broader sense, he can truthfully be called the grandfather of the Uintah Basin. Excepting the early explorers and fur trappers and those connected with the Indian service, he was the first white man to make the Basin his home and to make any sort of permanent and constructive use of its lands and resources. A history of A. M. Murdock's life then is inextricably woven with the history of the Uintah Basin and particularly Duchesne.

But to fully appreciate the texture and quality of this founder and father of a community, we must start back in the days of '47 when the Mormon pioneers made their historic trek to Utah, for it was at this time that his father, Joseph Stacy Murdock, began establishing his leadership as a young member of Ira Eldredge's company, traveling with his brother, Nymphas and mother, Sally Stacy Murdock, and young wife, Eunice Sweet Murdock.

Mrs. Murdock and her two sons had the distinction of bringing the first three sheep to Utah, which were led under the back of a light spring wagon and also brought the first flax seed which made the first linen thread in Utah. In them was the true pioneer spirit which was handed down to A. M.

A.M.'s mother was Elizabeth Hunter Murdock, born April 17, 1839 in Clackmananshire, Scotland. As Mormon converts, she with her mother and three other children sailed for America. In St. Louis, the mother died, leaving the four children alone, and the eldest, 16, married a widower, David Love, who promised to help the other children get to Utah. Elizabeth walked most of the way, bare-headed and bare-footed, caring for the family cow and her young brother, Jimmie, on the way. (This was in 1852).

Elizabeth Hunter was married to Joseph Stacy Murdock June 11, 1854, the fourth of his five polygamous wives. In 1856, they were called by Brigham Young to assist in colonizing Carson Valley, Nevada, then a part of the territory of Deseret. There were no roads and they had to travel as best they could. They carried seed with them and with the first crop bought a homestead from the Mexicans.

Here, A. M. was born, April 26, 1857. That autumn when crops were at their best, they were called back to Salt Lake because of the Johnston Army invasion and to get there, A. M.'s father had to sell his ranch and crops as they stood to some Texans on their way to the California gold fields in exchange for horses, wagon and cash to replace his wornout equipment.

Ten years of hard pioneering followed for the Murdock family, first in American Fork and later in Heber City, where A. M.'s father was first bishop and also first representative to the state legislature from Wasatch County. There was always progress though; a stone home was built in Heber; children were sent to school and life became somewhat easier.

A. M., for instance, cannot remember just what year he arrived in Heber, but he does remember that while there, when he was about 8 years old, he received his first pair of shoes. "I used to carry them under my arm more than I wore them, because I was afraid I'd wear them out and never get another pair," he says.

But Joseph Murdock's organizational ability was too valuable to the Mormon church to allow him to enjoy the comparative ease and security of the then well-established Heber City, and once more came the call to assist in colonizing, this time to Southern Nevada in what is known as the Muddy Mission. So in 1867 the Murdock family moved to the South, settling near the town of Moapa on the Muddy River, the settlement being called West Point.

History recounts that a great deal of land was cleared and planted to cotton, grain fields and vineyard. These early settlers met with hardships, privations, sickness and death, as proven by various cemeteries of these pioneer communities. Indians were hostile, grasshoppers sweeping everything before them and swarms of mosquitoes brought malaria fever.

Again A. M.'s memory records not the date, but the song they sang on their way to Dixie as it was called; "Of carrot tops and lucern we have enough to eat; but we'd like to change our diet to buckwheat cakes and meat."

The settlers had paid their taxes to Utah and to Arizona, only to find they were in Nevada where more taxes were demanded, so after a visit from Brigham Young whom A. M. says he remembers clearly, the project was abandoned for the time being and homes, orchards, 8,000 bushels of wheat were left behind.

The Murdock children were very happy to leave and when the father looked back as they came to a rise in the ground, he could see smoke rising. When asked about it, A. M. admitted he had lighted the match, so they could not decide to turn back.

It was the trip to and from the Muddy Mission and the life there that is given credit for one of the outstanding habits of A. M.'s life. Because of the heat and mosquitoes most of the travel was done at night. A. M. drove a yoke of oxen almost the entire way although he was just a mere lad. On the Muddy much of the work had to be done at night because of the heat and he became so sick of night work that he has made it a rule of his life ever since to work while the sun is shining for he says, "when it is dark no man should work."

In 1870, when they reached Provo, the father, knowing there were many mouths to feed, succeeded in securing the first government contract for carrying mail from Provo, by way of Heber and Kamas, to Echo. Here the boys were put to work in relays and with horses, none too good, they plunged and plodded through deep mud, zero weather and biting blizzards but still glad to have work to do. In Mr. Murdock's family were 32 children, of whom Elizabeth Hunter Murdock was the mother of A. M. and his 7 brothers and two sisters.

It was at this time, when 13 or 14 years old, that A. M. had the desire to earn some money of his own, but his father told him that he would soon be back home if he left. Determined to prove his father wrong he got a job as water boy, hauling water on a donkey for the miners of Park City at which he spent the whole winter. He

then helped in a store for a Provo merchant, he says, finally returning home with over 300 dollars, a fine stake for anyone in those days, which he turned over to his mother.

Joseph Murdock, his father, had a magnetic influence over the Indians and taught his family to feed and not to fight them. The Indians would listen to him and at the time of the Black Hawk troubles he took an active part in settling the uprising and getting a peace treaty signed. A.M. recalls being there at the time and seeing half a beef barbecued on the John Carroll lot in Heber. A monument recognizing the Indian Peace treaty has been erected by the Daughters of Utah Pioneers on the Court House ground there.

Interest in livestock became the deciding factor in A.M.'s destiny and was responsible for his entry into the Uintah Basin. He and a companion, Jim Clyde, undertook to ride herd on a thousand head of cattle belonging to Heber ranchers, grazing them in the broad expanse of Strawberry Valley now under the waters of Strawberry reservoir.

This herd was known as the Co-op herd, and gave its name to Co-op Creek which was a favorite camping spot for the herders.

In about 1885, when the feed in Strawberry Valley seemed inadequate for the cattle the ranchers wanted them to graze, Alva and Jim Clyde decided to investigate the Basin where the season was a little longer, and they rode along the Strawberry River and in Sam's and Slabb Canyons. Feed in these canyons was luxuriant then, he says, and the men thought that if they just owned these two canyons they would have everything that any cattleman might desire. Here was born an ambition which years later he realized. Not content even with this, however, the two young men went on down into the Basin prospecting the entire region much of which was held as an Indian reservation.

Final result was the leasing of the entire Basin by Alva, Jim Clyde and a third man, Charles Carter, for \$1,000 per year, from the Indian agent, with the stipulation that they confine their herd to cattle, barring horses and sheep which might get mixed with stock belonging to the Indians. "We really went into it in earnest then," he said. The following year their herd increased to 3,000 head of cattle.

When just a little over 20 years of age, Alva married Josephine Nicol, born January 25, 1859, a daughter of Thomas and Johanna Handberg Nicol, both also pioneers, Thomas coming from Scotland and Johanna a handcart pioneer of 1857, born and reared in Denmark, both sturdy, thrifty, kindly people both adapting their lives to fit early Utah.

Alva and his wife were married in Salt Lake City, June 24, 1877, but made their home in Heber, and he recalls that he was denied much of the pleasure of the usual young groom starting his home. Just three weeks after his marriage he suddenly was faced with the situation of a man whom he had hired to take care of his cattle in the Basin demanding more money and rather than pay the increase he took over the horse, saddle and provisions he had provided for the herder and went to the Basin himself. Since there was no one to relieve him he stayed on with the cattle, eventually finding himself snowed in, and it was nine months before he was able to return the next spring to his bride.

Time for the next years was divided between the Basin and Heber, though he kept his family in Heber for some time. At Heber his energy took him to such occupations as timbering and sawmilling. It was May 4, 1881, while bringing logs down the Provo River that he and his brother, Nymphus, were breaking a log jam that Nymphus was struck with one of the logs and killed. This was one of the saddest experiences of his life.

Freighting, too, occupied much of his time, and this again took him into the Basin. When Ft. Duchesne was first established with army troops to control the Indians. A.M. freighted supplies to them from Park City, first using ox teams which took 13 days to make the trip. At that time the road came up Daniels Canyon, then down the golden stairs, down the river, across Blue Bench and Red Cap crossing and thence eastward to Ft. Duchesne. On trips out, Mr. Murdock sometimes carried gilsonite for its discoverer, Sam Gilson. Incoming freight was taken not only to Ft. Duchesne but to the Indian agencies at Ouray and Whiterocks, and to the little settlement at Ashley Valley which later became Vernal.

In the meantime, Mr. Murdock was becoming a man of importance in Heber, where he was constantly interested in civic improvement. Among other responsible positions there was that of early school trustee and his interest in education never diminished. Ventures there included a livery business and a stage line to Park City, and when the D. & R. G. in 1899 built a branch line into Heber it broadened the market for livestock and A. M. took a great many selling trips east, besides supplying Park City markets with beef.

His family, too, was increasing. His first daughter, Hannah Elizabeth, was born October 30, 1878, and died a year later. Ida Josephine, now Mrs. Oscar Kirkham, was born July 10, 1880, followed by two other daughters, Dora and Vern.

It was 1885 when Vern was still a little girl that Mr. Murdock decided to establish a trading post at Whiterocks and took his wife and three daughters there to live. While Mr. Murdock ran the trading post his wife ran a boarding house for the government agency officials. This took much of Mrs. Murdock's time and sometimes for the entire day little Vern would be taken over by the Indians, he says.

The keen understanding of the Indians by A.M.'s father seemed to have been passed on to his son, and stood A.M. in good stead both in his trading with the Indians and in his many associations with them. The Indians learned to look on him as a friend and adviser, and held him in so much respect that in all the years he has run cattle in the Basin, it has never been proven that any Indian ever killed or stole a Murdock animal.

A.M. tells the story of having been at outs with the Indian supervisor at one time while he was running cattle in the Basin and after an argument the supervisor ordered the Indian police head, "Bull of the Woods" to escort Murdock off the reservation. "He knows the way out if he wants to go," the Indian said, and refused to carry out the mission.

During the three years Murdock operated the Whiterocks trading post he built part of the building still used by the Marimon trading post there now. He later sold out there and moved his family back to Heber.

He, himself, continued his activities here though and continued his friendship with the Indians, much of whose language he mastered. He had a contract to furnish the Indians with beef, since most of them did not raise cattle, preferring horses and sheep. Sometimes he would deliver 20 beeves at a time for slaughtering, he said. They would be driven into a corral and shot from the fence by white men and then the Indians would jump to the task of slaughtering. 500 to 600 Indians would be on hand to get their share.

All his experiences with the Indians were not friendly, however, and he had to rely on his understanding of them and his own resourcefulness to protect his skin more than once. On one occasion Mountain Sheep, who had his headquarters on Rock Creek near the pass, which bears his name, was on the warpath. A. M., who had to cross the river at this point, approached the Indian's camp warily and found it empty. He found the Indian's gun and unloaded it, hiding the shells under the bed, then proceeded to cross the river. While he was swimming his horse across the stream the Indian appeared, grabbed his gun and started trying to pump shells into it to shoot at the white man, but thanks to A. M.'s resourcefulness, the gun was empty and he went on his way unharmed.

After his return to Heber, the Indians used part of the large lot he had with his home as a camping ground; there was hardly a day during the summer months when travel to and from the Basin was possible without one or more Indian camps on the Murdock lot. And then came the move to the Basin to establish his permanent home here, when it was thrown open to homesteaders in 1905. By this time A. M. was well known and established both in Heber and in the Basin, among whites and Indians alike, a man of resources and accomplishments, able to see and grasp opportunities and with the resourcefulness to carry through his projects.

His family, by this time, had grown to nine living children, another child, a boy, having died at infancy. Preceding the opening A. M. had again kept in touch with developments by freighting supplies to the surveyors laying out the townsites and establishing section lines and had even taken a party of them on a fishing trip to Moon Lake. On this trip his eldest son, Grant, then a boy of 6 or 7 accompanied the party.

On the day before the opening A. M. by special permit was allowed to come in to establish a store and other accommodations to provide for the expected settlers. He brought in two wagons and a big circus tent which he set up beside an old cabin which he bought from an Indian, Segusie Jack, just across the street from his present home in Duchesne. In the cabin he kept his merchandise while the tent became store, boarding house and community center for the homesteaders who flocked in to select their lands.

On the second night of the opening a huge bonfire was built near the tent around which were gathered 52 men and Dora, his daughter, the only woman on the townsite. Grant was the only boy on the campsite. In honor of the occasion the crowd voted to call the settlement, Dora, the name it carried for some time until the post office was established under the name Theodore. "Dora was my right hand man," A. M. says in recounting the events of these days. "She freighted with me before the opening, helped me establish my business at the opening and in many ways did all any man could do until her younger brother grew big enough to take her place." Dora is now Mrs. Orson Ryan of Logan.

Besides A.M. and his son, Grant, there are not many left in Duchesne who can claim presence at that historic night. But he has stayed with Duchesne from that day to this. He moved his family out the following spring to establish his home. It must have been on July 31, 1905, that A.M. set up his circus tent on the townsite that was to be named first Dora, then Theodore and later Duchesne, ready to serve the first of the settlers who hurried out after registering to select their lands. It is characteristic of A.M. that though he never homesteaded a ranch himself, he later acquired and still owns the 160 acres filed and known ever since as "No. 1," being the homestead entry of Roy Daniels, who was No. 1 in the drawing, and situated just north of the townsite.

A.M. has a lot of other firsts to his credit in connection with the early history of Duchesne. He was the first settler here, his daughter was the first woman here and gave the town its first name; he brought in the first mail and became the first postmaster; he later became first bishop of the L.D.S. Ward, and when the town was organized, its first mayor; the first school was held in a cabin built on his lot which still stands; he ran the first store and operated the first regular stage; he truly is Duchesne's "First" citizen and has always been one of its most important ones.

It was not long before A.M. graduated from his tent-store to a real store building on Main Street, located near where the Granite Furniture Co. is now located. He had a granary and storehouse in the street leading to the courthouse before any street was designated there. Another building enterprise was the construction of the first entertainment hall in the reservation, still standing and still used by the Duchesne L.D.S. Ward.

It was A.M. who organized the Duchesne stage and transportation company, bringing mails and passengers into the basin when the automobile was in its infancy and when roads on which they travelled were not even good wagon roads. A.M. received 2¢ per pound for hauling parcel post from Helper or Colton to Duchesne and often lost money on it. Now trucks haul coal over the same route for \$3.00 per ton.

In all of this growth A.M. was not idle. It is hard to relate chronologically his activities through these years; they were spread over so wide a field. Many of the citizens are still here today who were among the Basin's residents 20 and 30 years ago, and hardly a one of them that has not had a lot of business transactions with A.M.; so wide were his interests. Merchant, cattleman, transportation magnate, businessman, Indian friend and adviser, civic leader and builder -- a man of great energy and wide experiences.

The lure of cattle again made itself felt by Mr. Murdock and he traded the Pioneer Supply Store, which his business was called by that time for the R. M. Pope ranch on the Strawberry River, adding to it huge holdings of cattle range in Slab and Sam's canyons, the range he and his partner, Jim Clyde, had seen and desired on their first trip into the basin so many years before. Here grew a really fine stock ranch, producing thousands of head of cattle and thousands of dollars for its owner. The "Home Ranch" as it is still called by local ranchers was a place of entertainment for the many friends of the Murdock family with plenty of horses to ride, a big range of cattle and all the atmosphere of the big western cattle ranch.

But business and civic enterprise kept A.M. in town much of the time and too much expansion of business is blamed for the crash which came after World War I, when financial difficulties cost him his big ranch. In the transaction, to salvage some of his loss, he took over a big ranch in California for a year, from which he harvested a big and profitable rice crop.

Back in 1913, Mr. Murdock lost his wife, Josephine, who died in Salt Lake City. In October 1915, he married Ivy Stephens Liddell, a fine kind lady who made a good home for him and his many friends were always welcome. Their son, Willard Stephens, was born April 5, 1919. In the meantime many of his large family of children had been married and were established in homes of their own, some in the Basin and others scattered about the state or in other states.

Of his twelve children, two died in infancy and Merle and Wells as adults, the latter occurring December 26, 1941, while Wells was working on a defense project near Las Vegas. The others are: Mrs. Oscar Kirkham, Salt Lake City; Mrs. Orson Ryan, Logan; Mrs. R.S. Lusty, and Grant Murdock, Duchesne; Mrs. R. W. Kroupa, Oakland, Calif.; Mrs. J. C. Hansen, Helper; Ralph C. Murdock, Crestone, Colorado and Willard S. Murdock, Texas. He also has thirty-six grandchildren and twenty great grandchildren.

Today (1942) we find A.M. still one of the town's leading citizens, still a friend and adviser of the Indians and still a vigorous, active citizen. He still believes that a man should work in daylight and sleep when it is dark and his neighbors can find him almost any morning at sunrise, riding a horse toward No. 1 to see about his livestock there or about the corrals and barns he maintains doing chores. At a recent election he was made president of the Duchesne Commercial Club, of which he has always been an active member. He was an active participant in the recent democratic county convention, and there is little that goes on in Duchesne or in the county that A.M. does not have information on and that he does not take a keen interest in.

A.M. and his wife live in the home they have maintained for years, less than a stone's throw from the spot where he set up his circus tent before the basin was opened; a home which always has its doors open to his friends, members of his family and the Indians of the Basin; a home where memories of the past can bring forth tales to interest the listener by the hour but where the chief thoughts are of today and of the future, for A.M. does not live in the past.

When he was 85 years of age, his health began to fail, but he was still active in civic affairs. At a meeting February 2, 1944, he was elected General Chairman for the Duchesne County Fair Committee. The year before he had been chairman of the Duchesne County Stampede. For the County Fair of 1944 it was decided by those responsible that an agricultural exhibit would stimulate better production of food and livestock. Exhibits of livestock, garden produce, needlework, and canning were to be featured and a rodeo was to be the main part of their entertainment.

Although his health was failing he continued to be active in civic and home affairs and rode his favorite horse daily. At the insistence of his family he sought medical aid in Salt Lake City and underwent an operation for uremic poisoning. He was later taken to the home of his daughter, Mrs. Oscar A. Kirkham, where all thought he was

improving until the morning of November 1, 1944. He realized the end was near and asked Oscar to say a prayer and a great spirit passed on.

A. M. Murdock was one of the last of Utah's outstanding, stalwart pioneers. By birth, environment and personal belief he was destined to be a conqueror and builder of the rough, unsettled West. Endowed with marvelous physical strength and endurance, his well-schooled mind contributed ambition, determination and almost superhuman courage.

When he thought he was right he knew no fear. The rough, hard road offered a challenge and if there was work to be done for the welfare of fellowmen, A. M. Murdock was there, willing and ready to direct and encourage, and to do far more than his share. He never left civilization, as some, to avoid it; he went to make more of it. He voluntarily went to the wilds to accept their challenge, to conquer, to settle and to build. He virtually carried a lantern in his hand to guide and help any one who came his way and needed help.